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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANAMA 000982

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SUBJECT: SOCIAL AFFAIRS MINISTER DISCUSSES SOCIETY CLOSING,
TIP SHELTER, CHARITIES WITH AMBASSADOR

REF: MANAMA 943

Classified By: Ambassador William T. Monroe. Reason: 1.4 (B)(D)

11. (C) Summary. Minister of Social Affairs Fatima Al-Belooshi told the Ambassador June 6 that her recent decision to suspend the Shia rejectionist Islamic Action Society for 45 days was in fact the least harsh option, and one that would have little practical impact. Lamenting the Society's focus on the past (the coup plot of 1982), she said that freedom of speech is important but must take place in a legal way. The Minister said that plans to open a government-run shelter for abused women were moving forward on two tracks: renting space to get something open in the short term, and building a permanent facility over the next year. The Ministry has introduced a new measure to strengthen control over outflows of charity funds: using monthly reports prepared by the central bank to cross-check NGO funds sent abroad. The Minister said she is strengthening her Ministry, seeking to double its staff. One project aims at developing an incubator for small businesses run by women. End summary.

12. (C) The Ambassador opened the meeting by asking the Minister about her decision to close the Shia rejectionist Islamic Action Society for a period of 45 days following a ceremony it held June 29 honoring 73 people convicted in the early 1980s for attempting to topple the government (reftel). The Minister downplayed the significance of the Ministry's action, saying that it was the least harsh of the three possible moves (other possibilities were to replace the board or permanently shut the society down). She noted that, with the summer vacation season upon us, the Society would not have planned much activity over the next 45 days anyway, so the punishment had limited practical effect.

13. (C) Asked what specifically the Society had done to warrant suspension, Al-Belooshi said that speakers had insulted the Prime Minister and the King by name, and had also committed many other infractions over time, including distributing books without proper authorization. More generally, she lamented the Society's focus on the past, saying that so much progress has been achieved that it was a shame that certain groups, in this new era of free speech, continue to bring up problems of the past. "Freedom of speech is important," she stated, "but it needs to take place in a legal way."

14. (C) The Ambassador asked about the status of plans to build a government-run shelter for abused woman (often foreign housemaids). Al-Belooshi said that the shelter is a high priority for her and that she is moving forward in a two-step process. First, in order to get something up and running quickly, the Ministry is renting a facility as an interim step. Second, the Ministry has identified land owned by the Ministry of Interior on which it will build a permanent shelter. Plans have been drawn up, and funding has been secured. She estimated that it would take about a year to build the permanent facility, which would be co-located with a juvenile center.

15. (C) Noting that the Ministry of Social Affairs has responsibility for oversight of charities, the Ambassador asked about the measures in place to regulate and control outflows of funds from charities in Bahrain. Al-Belooshi asserted that strong regulations are in place, and that charities need permission from the Ministry in order to send funds overseas. Every registered NGO is required to have in its by-laws an article stating that it will not send funds abroad without permission from the Ministry. Acknowledging that compliance is crucial, she said that she recently met with Bahrain Monetary Agency (BMA) Governor Al-Maraj to help improve coordination between the Ministry of Social Affairs and the BMA. They agreed to implement a system where the BMA will send a monthly report to the Ministry advising which NGOs have sent money abroad. By cross-checking with the Ministry's list of which NGOs requested permission to send funds abroad, the Ministry will now be able to better monitor compliance.

16. (C) Al-Belooshi added that there are some NGOs or ad hoc groups that have not registered with the Ministry. Some of these ad hoc groups have been in operation for a long time, she stated. When she first came to the Ministry earlier this

year, she began an effort to get these unregistered entities registered and legal. In any event, if they are not registered they cannot open a bank account to send funds abroad through legal channels.

17. (U) Stating that she is an academic and not a politician, Al-Belooshi acknowledged that she is not as comfortable dealing with such political issues as Bahrain's very active political societies, and would much prefer to focus on the core work of her Ministry. She said that social affairs had often played a secondary role to labor under the old Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, and that she has focused much of her energies, during her initial months as Minister of the now independent Ministry of Social Affairs, strengthening the Ministry. To do this, she is trying to double the staff of the Ministry from 500 to 1,000. She said she is trying to develop a national strategy to fight poverty, focusing on education, training, and small-scale entrepreneurship. One project coming into operation is a retail and workshop center being built in the Seif business district as an incubator for women attempting to start small businesses. The Ministry will supply microcredits and temporary space. As businesses get established, they will be moved out to make room for new aspiring businesswomen. Ultimately, she hopes to establish similar centers elsewhere in Bahrain.

MONROE